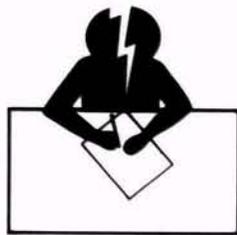


*EL:* Nairn says SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores are not a good predictor of success in college.

*Hargadon:* A number of articles have been published pointing out weaknesses in Nairn's statistical methods.<sup>1</sup> That study both underestimates the usefulness of tests and overestimates their use. The fact is that SAT scores do help predict academic achievement in the first year of college. Hundreds of studies indicate that grades are a good predictor alone, that test scores are a good predictor alone, and that grades and test scores together are the best predictor of all. There is no perfect predictor, of course; the evidence for that comes from ETS (Educational Testing Service) and the College Board themselves. But the combination of test scores and grades predicts far better than Nairn allows in his study.



## On Admissions Testing: A Conversation with Fred Hargadon

---

*As Chairman of the College Board, Fred Hargadon strongly disagrees with the Nairn report. In this interview with Ron Brandt, Executive Editor of Educational Leadership, he gives his version of the truth about testing.*

---

What people sometimes forget is that when one compares grades of first year students with their SAT scores—which is the most feasible validity study you can run—you show less predictability than actually exists because you've selected out the least qualified students.

Furthermore, if you aggregate all the data from students who were admitted to all institutions and don't take into consideration differences among institutions, you will again show less predictability than is actually the case. Some colleges have much lower academic standards than others. They admit students who have relatively low grades and relatively modest test scores, but they still give a lot of them A's and B's. Using data that

way, you can show that even with low test scores and low grades some students do well in college, *in general*. Obviously that's not to say those same students would do well at more rigorous colleges.

Tests are helpful because there must be some objective way to look at a million and a half students coming from 27,000 high schools to make some determination about who among them has a reasonable chance of doing well in a particular program at a particular college. The only other way—and some colleges do this—is to admit everybody and plan to flunk out a large percentage by the end of the first year. Many colleges used to do it, but now with measures that are reasonably good predictors, we have far less attrition,

particularly in the selective colleges, than we otherwise would. It makes far more sense, for institutions and students alike, to attempt to make some judgments regarding the best match of educational resources on the one hand and student abilities on the other.

*EL:* Does the selection process discriminate against disadvantaged students?

*Hargadon:* If you mean students from low income families, no. At all colleges today, including

<sup>1</sup> For example, Jessica Tuckman Mathews, "A Measure of SAT's," *Washington Post*, 7 February 1980; Daniel Seligman, "Keeping Up," *Fortune*, 10 March 1980, p. 430.

the most selective ones, about half the students receive financial aid running from \$100 to as much as \$9,000 a year. If Nairn had looked at the *distribution* of test scores by income level, he would have seen that at all income levels some people score low on the test and some score very high. It's not surprising there's a relationship between income and test scores, but it's hardly the direct relationship Nairn implies. What accounts for the considerable number of exceptions? And why are many students from low income backgrounds admitted to very selective institutions?

Nader and Nairn want you to overlook the fact that many people with high incomes today came from families with quite low incomes back in the 30s and 40s. There has been far more social mobility, at least partly as the result of education, than Nader or Nairn dare take into account, let alone attempt to explain.

*EL:* But low income students often have lower scores. Do some institutions have cutoff scores that eliminate such students from even being considered?

*Hargadon:* Most institutions that have cutoff scores use them

only when a student's grades fall below a certain level. In the California system, for instance, it's really rank in class and grades that are the main determinants. If a student has very poor grades, the admissions people check to see whether that student's test scores are sufficiently high to offset them. That's quite a different thing from setting a cutoff score and not looking at anything else.

#### Other Factors

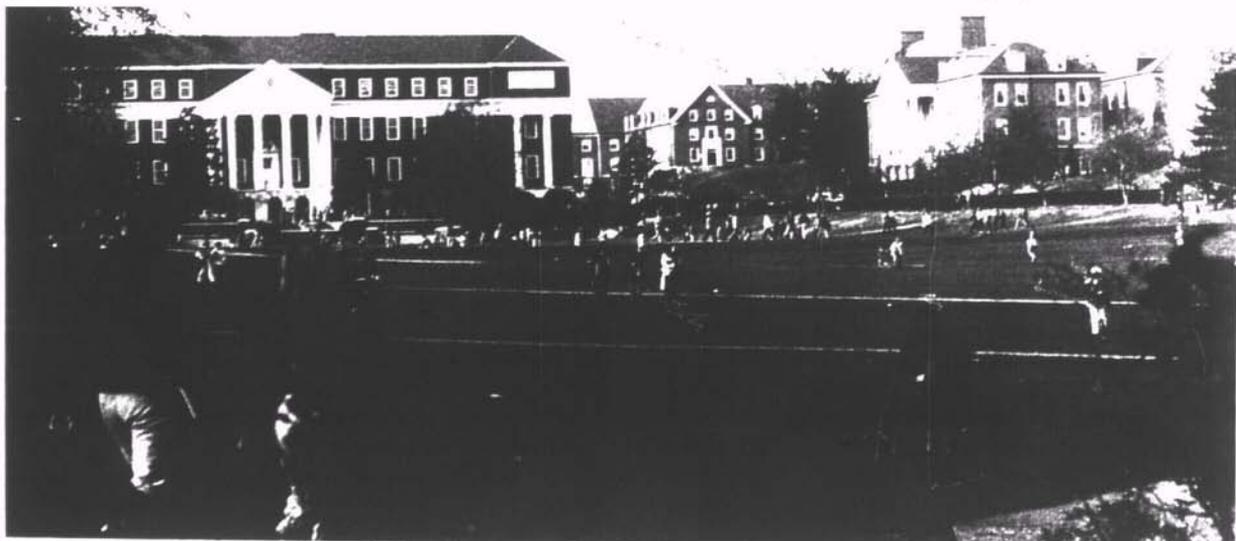
*EL:* So SAT scores are not the only factor considered in the selection process?

*Hargadon:* They never have been, as far as I know. Study after study shows that. Stanford is a member of a consortium of 30 colleges and universities among the most selective in the country—Harvard, University of Chicago, Northwestern, and so on. We pool our data each year to see what is happening and to get some indication of the amount of overlap in applications. Our most recent data show that 430 individual applicants with SAT verbal scores between 750 and 800 (that's just verbal scores) were turned down. In that same year (1978), 5,531 individual applicants with verbal

scores between 500 and 550 were admitted by these schools. Now that simply can't be squared with Nader and Nairn's contention that test scores are the sole determinant.

Almost every institution among the most selective in the country has some students with verbal scores as low as 350. That can happen in any number of ways. For example, a student may be from a home where Chinese is spoken but may have test scores that show exceptional ability in chemistry or physics. Or a student may come from a school that is known for its solid academic program. On the other hand, you will find students with very high test scores, but with low achievement and low motivation, being turned down by all these colleges.

Nader gives the impression that the world is divided between young men and women who have high academic achievement and high test scores on the one hand, and those with creativity, wisdom, judgment, and character on the other. I know of no evidence to suggest that people with high academic ability as revealed by high test scores have any less creativity, wisdom, judgment, or character than other people.



*"There has been far more social mobility . . . as the result of education"*

Photo: NEA, Joe DiDio



Fred Hargadon is Dean of Admissions, Stanford University, Stanford, California.

**EL:** Critics of tests say students should be able to see their corrected answer sheets and compare their answers with what the test-makers expected.

**Hargadon:** I have no objection in principle to students seeing the answers to a test, but tests are very expensive to make up. One doesn't just reach in and pull a set of questions out of a bag. The questions have to be carefully validated. The tests must be equated for difficulty from year to year. The issue is whether most students would rather pay \$9 simply to take the test or pay \$15 to get back an answer sheet and the correct answers. I don't think most students would gain much educationally from seeing the answers to a test like the SAT. But the people advocating disclosure aren't making great educational arguments for it. Some are using it to advance themselves politically; some are like Nader—using it to harass the testing agencies, which they would like to put out of business anyway.

**EL:** What about effects of the tests on student aspirations?

**Hargadon:** The Nader study cites five examples of people who did poorly on the tests and felt bad. A million and a half students take the test each year. Some are deeply disappointed with the results; a lot have false modesty;

some are slightly discouraged; some have keen satisfaction; and some feel sheer joy. The fact is that for many students these tests are a godsend. Last week I picked up an application on which a student answered an essay question about what event or person had most influenced his life. He said it was achieving a fairly high score on the PSAT. "My scores were not exceedingly high on a national level, but they were the highest in my high school and far exceeded my expectations. . . . The PSAT caused a monumental shift in my way of thinking and showed me that perhaps I was capable of more than I thought." That reaction is no more representative of all the million and a half students who take the test than are the reactions of the five cited by Nairn—but it certainly stands in contrast with their attitudes.

**EL:** What do you expect to be the result of the criticisms of admissions testing?

**Hargadon:** The most dangerous result is the demagogic appeal a legislator can have using Nader-type tactics to get legislation in this area and to control college admissions. These are people who don't want to recognize different levels of ability, different levels of motivation, different levels of achievement. There have always been such differences, and there always will be.

It's ironic that Nader should attack testing at a time when a lot of people are asking for more use of objective criteria in selection processes, especially in employment, so they can show they have the necessary abilities and won't be turned down because of the color of their skin, because they're women, because of their age, and so on. If these tests did not exist, and college admissions were done completely subjectively, parents and students would be demanding tests of the very sort we have now.

---

## LETTERS

(continued from page 612)

### An Important Challenge

Earlier this year I wrote commending you about the new tone of *Educational Leadership*. I do so again because I have been re-reading the December 1979 and February 1980 issues in my preparation for teaching my new course, "Improving Social Education." In particular I have found Henry A. Giroux's article [Dec. 1979], "Toward a New Sociology of Curriculum," of much interest. Giroux's article challenges much of what we in ASCD hold dear, and it is, therefore, all the more important for *Educational Leadership* to encourage Giroux and others to pursue the points raised in this article.

I commend you for publishing Giroux's article and recommend that you publish future articles of similar merit and focus for the benefit of us all.

Ronald T. Hyman  
Professor and Chairperson  
School of Education  
Rutgers, The State  
University of New Jersey  
New Brunswick

**Editor's note:** Readers' comments on this and other articles are welcome. Address letters to Editor, *Educational Leadership*, 225 No. Washington St., Alexandria, Virginia 22314. Letters accepted for publication may be edited for brevity and clarity.

Copyright © 1980 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.